

Gazing on Fu-Manchu: Obscurity and Imperial Crisis in the Work of Sax Rohmer

Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory. The geographical sense... makes possible the construction of various kinds of knowledge, all of them in one way or another dependent upon the perceived character and destiny of a particular geography. —Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Edward Said has argued that British national identity in the nineteenth century was imagined geographically: from the provincial drawing rooms of Jane Austen's novels to the vast, exotic landscapes of Rider Haggard's adventures, the centrality and dominance of the metropole was set against distant, subordinate lands (78). Popular adventure stories like Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) offered "confident" stories of empire that promised "what one cannot do in one's Western environment...one can do abroad" (187, 159). In *Kim*, the "luxurious geography and spatial expansiveness" of India and Kim's ease of movement on the Grand Trunk Road and among the castes of English India signify "[t]he opulence of India's space, [and] the commanding British presence there" (Said 159). In *King Solomon's Mines*, Allan Quartermain's ability to describe the landscape and people of Kukuana reinforces a bifur-

cated model of imperialism in which the power of Empire is set over and against the colony itself, which serves as the mute object of this gaze. As Sara Suleri has argued, such models construe imperialism as a highly asymmetrical arrangement of power predicated on “static lines of demarcation between imperial power and disempowered culture, between colonizer and colonized” (3). Linking visibility and imperial power, this model replicates the rigidly dichotomous visual structures said to characterize early twentieth-century anthropology and imperial travel narratives: to see is to control; to be seen is to be controlled. Like museum exhibitions and world’s fairs, adventure tales visualize a colonial terrain and populace “out there,” away from the center of empire, which they then bring home to a readership in Britain.¹

Despite the dogged confidence in Britain’s imperial project displayed by Kipling and Haggard, the cracks in the British Empire began to show at the turn of the twentieth century. Intense lobbying for Irish Home Rule, the British debacle in the Boer War, and Sun Yatsen’s rebellion against British control of China made it increasingly clear that the colonies weren’t content under British rule, nor was British military might what it seemed. By 1900, Simon Gikandi contends, “imperial spaces can no longer be conceived—or represented—as spaces that secure English identity” (165). Both modernist literature and the early thrillers that began appearing at the turn of the twentieth century dismantle this close connection between imperial power and the visual mastery of colonial terrain in order to register the impact of Britain’s imperial crises. In the invasion narratives that dominate many early thrillers—such as William Le Queux’s *The Invasion of 1910* (1906), Erskine Childers’s *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), and Sax Rohmer’s *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913)—Britain finds itself subject to a foreign invasion instead of conquering distant lands. These stories dole out brash, bare-knuckled patriotism, as their English heroes expose and expel foreign spies and revolutionaries plotting the downfall of the British Empire. Because these invasion narratives always end with the expulsion of the foreign threat, critics like Michael Denning have seen them as little more than “compensatory myth[s]” for the crisis of British imperialism in the early twentieth century (39).² Such accounts argue that England’s empire may be crumbling, but it can still cling to a fantasy of imperial mastery and national purity. However, by exposing Britain’s constant vulnerability to invasion and infil-

tration, these novels also register a deep-seated anxiety about the weakness of the British Empire.

Sax Rohmer's tales of Dr. Fu-Manchu's attempts to conquer Britain reverse the dynamic of the confident imperialist gaze. The hypnotic, mysterious images of the Chinese villain in *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, the first collection of Fu-Manchu stories, exerted such a pull on audiences that they prompted Rohmer to write numerous sequels and provided the inspiration for seven films between 1920 and 1940. In these stories Rohmer dismantles the univocal trajectory of the gaze found in many nineteenth-century adventure narratives, allowing power to circulate within the visual exchange as both a distracting force *and* the precondition for resolute imperial force. Rather than reading popular thrillers as mere reaction formations against imperial malaise, I will explore how they generate a narrative of Britain's vulnerability by dismantling the structure of visuality found in nineteenth-century imperialist fictions.

Too Close for Comfort: The British Empire and Its Others

Many modernist authors intimate that the distant lands of empire fail to secure British national identity. In Conrad's fictions, for instance, Africa no longer serves as a mysterious landscape that reaffirms the English subject's power to name, describe, and control the colonial other. Instead, Conrad employs an impressionist strategy that thwarts a stable point of view that would enable a comprehensive view of the colonial landscape. Furthermore, Conrad's infamously convoluted prose style continually militates against an easy understanding of what's "out there" in the Congo. These fleeting, contingent visions have earned modernism the wrath of Marxist critics like Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson: by embodying vision in individual points of view and shifting restlessly between them, modernist authors produce a series of disjunctive, spatial forms that fail to capture the totality of imperialist capitalism.³ While such critiques of modernism have exposed many of the blind spots that its emphasis on form occasions, they tacitly assume that narrative, and *only* narrative, remains capable of capturing the relations of power that define politics.

Recent work in modernist studies attempts to redress these sweeping condemnations of the spatializing, anti-narrative thrust of modernism by

considering the role that impressionist and stream-of-consciousness techniques play—not just in representing power, but in facilitating its deployment in mass movements that increasingly defined early twentieth-century political life. Michael North argues that, in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, the crowd’s decipherment of the toffee advertisement written in the sky by an airplane links power and spectacle as the psychological power of new publicity techniques of advertising impinge on the collective psyches of the crowd. Similarly, Jennifer Wicke argues that Virginia Woolf’s “telekinetic consciousness” depicts the experience of commodification in a way that allows for a “reauraticization” of the image through personal history and collective desire. While these revisionist accounts have sought to connect individual, subjective perceptions to the larger social network in which they appeared, they have largely focused on how such strategies negotiate the increasing commodification of British culture in the early twentieth century and how they image “the masses.” Instead of directly answering the Marxist critiques of modernist subjectivism, these critical revisions merely shift the terrain of the debate by reducing the power dynamics at work in the act of seeing to the smoke-and-mirrors false-consciousness of advertising.

Like Conrad’s modernist imperial fictions, the invasion narratives of the early 20th century address the weakness at the heart of Britain’s empire, but they do so by revealing it directly. While Conrad’s fictions suggest that the colonial landscape no longer secures British identity, invasion narratives push this logic to its extreme, insinuating that the home country itself cannot secure it. Anchored on the Thames, Marlow may recall that England itself was once a Roman colony, but this reversal of the imperial power dynamic remains temporally distant. In the early thrillers of William Le Queux, Erskine Childers, and Sax Rohmer, *modern* Britain itself becomes the site over which the reversal of the imperial power dynamic is staged. No longer in a position of imperial mastery, the homeland finds itself the victim of its supposedly weaker rival, Germany, in Le Queux’s *The Invasion of 1910* (1906), Childers’s *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), and Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). By obliterating the spatial expanse that subtends the global basis of British imperial power in nineteenth-century adventure novels, these early thrillers expose the sudden emergence of the national other in the midst of the imperial center. Britain, and, in some cases, London itself becomes a site of the potential erasure of

British identity. The invasion narrative accomplishes this reversal by transforming geographical expanse and narrative movement into static but palpable images of the national other. The narrative movement of these thrillers consists of staging the repeated appearance of the “other” on British soil and then allowing the protagonist to identify and expel the foreign threat. In so doing, these invasion narratives mobilize the classificatory logic that distinguishes Britain’s imperial mastery in previous imperial fictions and travel narratives, but they transform the distance between Britain and its colony into an antithesis between hero and villain. While the abundance of the colonial landscape *for* the colonial subject once defined British power abroad, in these invasion narratives, exotic details are crystallized into a series of all-too-proximate national types, like the cleverly disguised German spy.

The emphasis these thrillers place on *visualizing* national differences produces an essentialized nationalism that engages in a less than subtle process of imagining “the British nation” through its steadfast and ceaseless opposition to all things foreign. Although the act of exposing a foreign presence serves as the crucial means of generating narrative action, this action is often highly circular. In part this repetition reflects the serial publication of many of these early invasion narratives in the tabloid press and fiction magazines prior to their publication in novel form: Le Queux’s *The Invasion of 1910* was published serially in *The Daily Mail* in 1906 and his *Spies of the Kaiser* was first published serially in *The Weekly News* in 1909; Rohmer’s first Fu-Manchu stories were published in *Story-Teller* in 1912 and early 1913. As a result, the narrative movement of these stories often degenerates into a compulsive, seemingly inexhaustible process of sorting suspected spies into the categories of “the German,” “the Chinese,” and “the Brit.” Sara Suleri has noted that the ceaseless repetition animating this categorizing impulse attests to the “dynamic of powerlessness at the heart of the imperial configuration” rather than its ability to impose a system (3). Only because British identity is inherently unstable does it need to be continually policed and reaffirmed. Although they engage in writing the nation as what Benedict Anderson has called an “an imagined political community,” they imagine it as anything but “inherently limited and sovereign” (6).

While Britain’s military rivalry with Germany dominates many of the early invasion narratives, Sax Rohmer pushes this power reversal further in

his first Fu-Manchu novel, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, by making Britain subject to the secret machinations of a colony itself. Inspired by his own investigative journalism on the Chinese community in East London's Limehouse area, Rohmer's Fu-Manchu stories reproduce many of the myths of Chinese national character that animated the "Yellow Peril" of the first decades of the twentieth century: the insular immigrant community with close ties to political groups in China, the opium addict, the docile immigrant laborer willing to work for subsistence wages, and the radical alterity of the East (Clegg 13-36). In *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, the villainous Chinese doctor arrives in Britain in order to either kill or kidnap a series of British scientists and politicians who are capable of exposing his plot to conquer the West. Nayland Smith, a Burmese civil servant and noted Orientalist, and Dr. Petrie, his civilian friend, repeatedly rush to thwart the Chinese doctor's attempted attacks on various British luminaries. These include: a former British Major-General in India, who is about to publish a book exposing Fu-Manchu's network; an American aviator who holds the plans for a new aero-torpedo; and a peer responsible for designing a new canal linking Europe and Asia. Part Holmesian investigation of the criminal, part police pursuit of the national other, Rohmer repeatedly recounts Smith and Petrie's frantic race to the scene of the crime to identify the telltale signs of Fu-Manchu's presence. Sometimes Smith and Petrie arrive just in time to foil the attempted assassination or kidnapping plot; other times they fail. The repeated incursion of Fu-Manchu and his delegates and the descriptive power marshaled to visualize the quintessentially foreign nature of this threat provide the moments of greatest tension. The novel's narrative links the scientific gaze of Dr. Petrie, whose training as a doctor makes him an expert at reading the visual symptoms of the body, with Smith, whose experience as a civil servant in Burma enables him to classify the nature of Fu-Manchu's threat and subject them to the power of British imperial authority.

Like other invasion narratives, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* continually exposes the presence of the national other in the heart of the Britain, yet Rohmer holds Fu-Manchu himself in abeyance for much of the narrative. As a result, Fu-Manchu's otherness often finds expression in the series of exotic weapons and mysterious assassins he deploys against the British. In the first novel alone, Rohmer conjures a seemingly inexhaustible

arsenal of obscure means of murder for his villain: the “Zayat Kiss,” an “unclassified” centipede that leaves a mysterious “faint red mark, not unlike the imprint of painted lips” (36, 9); a poisonous “yellowish-green . . . oily vapor” sent to Smith and Petrie via the post (156-7); the “mark of Kali” left by the religious stranglers Fu-Manchu employs (198); a cellar full of exotic fungi that emit toxic molds (326 ff.); and the poisonous “venom of a kind of swamp adder” (346), to name a few. Despite the diverse origins of these means of murder, they share one underlying feature: even to the eyes of a trained doctor like Petrie, they are all “unknown to Western science” (288). Every time he and Smith arrive on the scene of one of Fu-Manchu’s attempted crimes, Petrie proffers lengthy descriptions that visualize the exotic character of his methods. Upon seeing the Zayat Kiss, Petrie dwells on its unusual appearance:

It was an insect, full six inches long, and of a vivid, venomous, red color! It had something of the appearance of a great ant, with its long, quivering antennae and its febrile, horrible vitality; but it was proportionately longer of body and smaller of head, and had numberless rapidly moving legs. In short, it was a giant centipede, apparently of the scolopendra group, but of a form quite new to me. (35)

Striving to describe the appearance of the mysterious Zayat Kiss, Petrie likens its features to those of species known to Western science (an “ant,” a “centipede” of the “scolopendra group”). This emphasis on describing and classifying the physical features of Zayat Kiss mark Petrie’s look as an “anthropological gaze” that asserts a rigid distinction between viewing subject and viewed object in order to render the difference between the two as one of *absolute* difference, and, in turn, to “consolidat[e] . . . this difference into a visual shorthand or racial iconography” (Columpar 35). The denotative terminology of Western science enables the unknown centipede to become intelligible as a species already known to both Petrie and the reader, while its oddity allows it to be turned into a metaphor for the essential difference of all things Eastern. Although the Zayat Kiss eludes precise classification, the convergence of description, classification, and excess visualizes the signs of Fu-Manchu’s presence at the same time it transforms them into signifiers for an ineffable difference.

Fresh from a tour of duty in the British Civil Service in Burma, Nayland Smith often offers explanations of these rare poisons and arcane assassina-

tion methods. Recognizing that the perfume on the envelope sent to Sir Crichton attracts the mysterious centipede, Smith waits for the creature's reappearance. When it does appear, he crushes it with a golf club. Petrie visualizes the mysteriousness of the Zayat Kiss, while Smith's intimate experience with the East provides a context that legitimates violent action against it. Smith's gaze exhibits an ability to observe that is strikingly similar to Petrie's scientific gaze, but it also carries with it a "disciplinary component" that both Corinn Columpar and Anne MacClintock have identified as the hallmark of a distinctively imperialist gaze.⁴ Smith's proclivity for swift, violent action against the appearance of Fu-Manchu's delegates brings the coercive force of imperial power (and not merely the power to regulate representations of otherness) into action. The narrative visualizes the danger of the colonial other, affirms its opposition to British identity, and attempts to legitimate the physical force mobilized against it. As a result, Rohmer binds the process of visualizing the diverse signs of Fu-Manchu's presence to the violent action that follows it. The mysterious yet visible difference of Fu-Manchu's delegates doesn't thwart imperial power, but rather provokes the classificatory and police powers that will be exercised against it.

Consuming Visions: The Face of Fu-Manchu

Although Fu-Manchu's various emissaries provide ample opportunity for Dr. Petrie's classificatory gaze, the figures of the doctor himself and his slave, Karamaneh, mark the moments when this rational gaze falters. In the first Fu-Manchu novels, Karamaneh, the mysterious woman who acts as both Fu-Manchu's agent and an aid to Smith and Petrie, functions as the objectified image of the colonial other. With her "jewel-laden hands," "clinging silk gown," and "wonderful eyes," Karamaneh is an alluring visual object that echoes Fu-Manchu's own aesthetic qualities (47, 46, 47). While Fu-Manchu himself remains precariously visible in the text, Karamaneh's appearances function as moments of gratuitous display:

She threw open her cloak, and it is a literal fact that I rubbed my eyes, half believing that I dreamed. For beneath, she was arrayed in gossamer silk which more than indicated the perfect lines of her slim shape; wore a jeweled girdle and barbaric ornaments;

was a figure fit for the walled gardens of Stamboul—a figure amazing, incomprehensible, in the prosaic setting of my rooms. (151)

Petrie's evocative, detailed description of Karamaneh effectively turns her into an exotic object of aesthetic contemplation. When Karamaneh throws back her cloak, she reveals little—only further layers of ornamental detail. The layers of aestheticization in which Rohmer cloaks Karamaneh underscore her status as pure spectacle, whose sheer visual gratuity signifies the presumed alterity of the East. As an object to be seen, the visual excess of Karamaneh accentuates her difference from Petrie, the rational perceiving subject. The heterosexual nature of this encounter and the ethnic difference between the British doctor and the Eastern woman heighten the polarized nature of this exchange of gazes, rendering the trajectory of Petrie's desiring gaze a highly asymmetrical one.

Karamaneh's status as an object of display also acts as a sign of her political subordination. "I am not free, as your English women are," she explains to Petrie; "What I do I must do, for it is the will of my master, and I am only a slave" (48). Against Petrie's power to look and desire, Karamaneh exhibits a profound loss of individual agency. Her status as spectacle is symptomatic of her domination at the hands of Fu-Manchu, who uses her as he does the other subjects under his command. By noting her difference from English women, Rohmer uses her ethnic difference as a means of doubling her objectification: not only is she the object of male desire; she's also an object of political oppression. In this way, Karamaneh's doubly objectified status—as an object of a male gaze and a colonial gaze—functions as a figure for the complete liquidation of political agency. An ornamental object of display, Karamaneh acts as one of the novel's figurations of the annihilation of political agency, against which the "freedom" and political subjectivity of the British characters are defined.

Rather than ontologizing the operation of the heterosexist, colonial gaze at work in Karamaneh's construction, Rohmer reveals its deeply ambivalent function. The consummate distraction, Karamaneh provides a dazzling spectacle for Petrie, but her "intoxicating" sensuality also threatens to turn him into a vulnerable, feminized subject much like herself. Having surrendered all power over herself, Karamaneh's only alternative is to become the means by which Fu-Manchu thwarts Petrie's participation in British retaliation. When she appears, Petrie often finds himself so enraptured by

her alluring presence that he cannot act. In her elaborately exotic appearance, Karamaneh embodies the deleterious effects of visuality that Walter Benjamin associated most closely with fascism's power to "render politics aesthetic," by giving the masses "a chance to express themselves" without transforming the capitalist system of property relations (241). In so doing, fascism's spectacles merely *distract* the masses from political action.⁵ To contemplate the exotic spectacle of Karamaneh may signal Petrie's agency as a desiring, imperial subject, since he remains the wielder of the look. However, to be transfixed by this spectacle also carries with it the danger of losing one's political agency, of having chosen to look rather than act. In the exchanges between Karamaneh and Petrie, Rohmer construes the spectacle in predominantly negative terms: looking offers a distraction from action, while being looked at acts as a sign of the loss of political agency.

In the figure of Fu-Manchu, Rohmer explores a more productive relationship between visuality, aestheticization, and power than that which defines Karamaneh. The most visceral moments of Rohmer's invasion narratives occur when Petrie catches a glimpse of Fu-Manchu. Rohmer's rendering of Fu-Manchu transforms him into a figure of power through an accumulation of descriptive details that highlight his status as pure vision. When Fu-Manchu appears, the narrative pace stalls, as Petrie finds himself enthralled by the enigmatic countenance of his adversary:

Of his face, as it looked out at me over the dirty table, I despair of writing convincingly. It was that of an archangel of evil, and it was wholly dominated by the most uncanny eyes that ever reflected a human soul, for they were narrow and long, very slightly oblique, and of a brilliant green. But their unique horror lay in a certain filminess (it made me think of the *membrana nictitans* in a bird) which, obscuring them as I threw wide the door, seemed to lift as I actually passed the threshold, revealing the eyes in all their brilliant iridescence. (72)

Although Petrie protests that he can't "writ[e] convincingly" of Fu-Manchu, he has little difficulty situating him within the alteritist polarities that define earlier attempts to classify his assortment of poisons and assassins. Manichaeic designations like the "archangel of evil" often precede the villain's visualization, as if to suggest that the typologies used to classify the colonial other actually precede and give intelligible form to their object. This tendency for disparaging types to precede and give intelligibility to the de-

scription that follows helps produce the “racist ideology” of the “yellow peril” for which the stories are notorious (Clegg ix). Fu-Manchu’s eyes have a “filminess” and “brilliant iridescence” that stymies the rational gaze of Petrie, which struggles to find meaning beneath the layers of visual appearance. If Fu-Manchu’s visage signifies anything, it only signifies its own impenetrability to the scientifically trained gaze of Dr. Petrie.

On one hand, the impenetrability of Fu-Manchu’s face merely offers a clumsy assertion of the radical alterity of the enigmatic East, marking the limits of Petrie’s classificatory gaze. However, the obscurity of Fu-Manchu’s face also serves a productive function by conceiving visibility as a conduit of power rather than a sign of its liquidation or deflection. In order to explore this convergence of visuality and political power, Rohmer mobilizes a technique most commonly associated with modernism. Allon White argues that the difficulty of early modernist authors like Joseph Conrad stems from their insistence on placing obscurity at the center of their works, enabling it to “produce new kinds of significance” (17). In modernist works, obscurity isn’t merely a surface effect that cloaks some underlying meaning; rather, it refuses “simple de-coding,” because it’s “productive of meaning at the same time as (apparently) concealing meaning” (16). Instead of constituting a mere distraction, the impenetrability of Fu-Manchu serves as the means by which power circulates in the process of visualization itself. Fu-Manchu’s opaque visage resists Petrie’s gaze and blocks his efforts to give meaning to it, yet it also helps produce the radical alterity of the East which sets the ensuing pursuit in motion.

In Petrie’s previous encounters with the doctor’s poisons and assassins, he maintains a rational distance from the scene that buttresses his power to observe the mysterious artifacts. However, during Petrie’s dream of Fu-Manchu, which occupies the center of the narrative and prefigures his subsequent appearances, he finds his gaze drawn inexorably to the face of Fu-Manchu: “From the instant that my eyes were drawn to the table and to the man who sat there, neither the incredible extent of the room, nor the nightmare fashion of its mural decorations, could reclaim my attention. I had eyes only for him” (162). Gone is the gaze of mastery that distinguished the imperial subject who was able to command the colonial vista. In its place is the figure of a Chinese man, who absorbs the gaze of the imperial subject instead of submitting to it:

Then, and almost instantaneously, the comparative sanity which I had temporarily experienced began to slip from me again; for the smoke faintly penciled through the air—from the burning perfume on the table—grew in volume, thickened, and wafted towards me in a cloud of gray horror. It enveloped me, clammily. Dimly, through its oily wreaths, I saw the immobile yellow face of Fu-Manchu. And my stupefied brain acclaimed him a sorcerer, against whom unwittingly we had pitted our poor human wits. The green eyes showed filmy through the fog. (163)

Petrie's attraction to the intense, concentrated image of Fu-Manchu—his "filmy" "green eyes" and "immobile yellow face"—attests to his loss of power. Unable to master its object, Petrie's gaze finds itself appropriated by it. While Fu-Manchu holds Petrie's gaze in its sway, "oily wreaths" of smoke and fog provide a screen that reasserts a modicum of distance between the two. The result is a vacillation between proximity and remoteness, fascination and repulsion, attraction and abjection that signifies Fu-Manchu's power over Petrie. This oscillation creates a sense of the power Fu-Manchu's image has to solicit, confound, and envelop Petrie's gaze. The visual opacity of Fu-Manchu threatens Petrie with his own liquidation as viewing subject: "An intense pain shot through my lower limbs, and, catching my breath, I looked down. As I did so, the points of the red slippers which I dreamed that I wore increased in length, curled sinuously upward, twined about my throat and choked the breath from my body!" (163-4). Petrie presents us with a nightmarish vision of the British subject engulfed by the colonial other, threatened with its own liquidation by the vision of alterity that exceeds its own limits.

The magnetism of Fu-Manchu's appearance collapses the distance between viewer and viewed and, with it, the space for deliberation and mastery that characterize the imperialist gaze. Yet, the obscurity of Fu-Manchu's visage also enables it to retain its aura, its power to overwhelm Petrie's rational gaze and thwart his ability to act. The image of Fu-Manchu exudes a powerful, auratic quality, that "unique phenomenon of a distance" that signified the auratic work of art for Benjamin, yet, unlike the auratic work of art, its power stems from its physical proximity to Petrie (239). (Editor's note: Cf. Moist, this issue, on Benjamin, art, and aura.) Instead of being the product of neutral observations, Fu-Manchu's visibility often emerges as the result of Petrie's own reveries or those of other characters.

As Miss Eltham awakes from a nap on the train, she catches a fleeting glimpse of “two green eyes” that “shone like the eyes of a cat” outside her window (81, 95). Frank Norris West experiences a drug-induced dream of the villain’s yellow face “draining me of something vital” (257). When Petrie confronts Fu-Manchu in his lab, “he and his surroundings tallied, almost identically, with the dream-picture” (221). The product of drug-induced visions or hazily recollected dream images, Fu-Manchu’s appearance often lacks the rational distance characteristic of the imperial subject’s commanding gaze. Instead, the alterity of Fu-Manchu emerges as the product of the active, desiring gazes of the British characters.

Alongside his enticing spectacles of Fu-Manchu, Rohmer instructs his readers how to consume these exotic fictions. Like adventure writers before him, Rohmer registers how Petrie reacts to the obscurity of Fu-Manchu. By dramatizing Petrie’s reactions to Fu-Manchu, Rohmer directs his readers’ responses through a surrogate figure, who provides a point of entry into the narrative. For instance, during Petrie’s final encounter with Fu-Manchu, Rohmer’s prose lingers on the stupefying effect the villain has on his hero: “At sight of him [Fu-Manchu] my heart leaped—and seemed to suspend its functions, so intense was the horror which this man’s presence inspired in me. My hand clutching the curtain, I stood watching him” (319). The face of Fu-Manchu occasions a mixture of fear, revulsion, and the desire to see more. In so doing, the opaque image of Fu-Manchu enables these moments of intense scrutiny to slow the narrative pace and elicit the affects that distinguish Petrie’s subjectivity. Fu-Manchu’s appearance occasions the production of feelings—fear, anxiety, the pressure to choose—that are denied to the villain himself.⁶ Only when the gaze of Fu-Manchu freezes him does Petrie begin to display the affect that constitutes subjectivity and that becomes a precondition for the protagonists’ pursuit of the Chinese doctor.

The inscrutability of Fu Manchu increasingly permeates the narrative and begins to function as the explanation for other events in Britain. Smith reads the Chinese doctor’s presence in everything: “I never see a report of someone found drowned, of an apparent suicide, of a sudden, though seemingly natural death, without wondering. I tell you, Fu-Manchu is omnipresent; his tentacles embrace everything” (129). This warning encourages the reader to consume the daily papers through the paranoid lens of the thriller’s invasion narrative and interpret seemingly innocuous events as potential

signs of a foreign invasion. Despite his mysteriousness, Fu-Manchu acts as the key by which Petrie, and also the reader, can access the “real” story behind those in the newspapers. Encompassing all that which cannot be contained by the imperialist gaze, Fu-Manchu acts as the key to reading the crisis of imperialism in the novel. Fu-Manchu marks the limits of that gaze at the same time he sustains it, providing it with an endless reservoir of mysterious emanations against which it may deploy its classifying gaze and punitive power.

This impulse to guide the reader’s reaction to the narrative’s surprises has earned popular fiction a dubious reputation. Roland Barthes has dismissed popular fictions as “readerly” texts that are merely the ossified “products (and not productions)... that make up the enormous mass of our literature” (5). Similarly, in *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco has critiqued “closed” texts, such as Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels, for offering the reader little opportunity to participate in the construction of meaning. Unlike modernist texts, whose disjointed spatial forms allow the reader to actively produce the narrative, the thriller manipulates its readers with narrative gimmicks for generating suspense. Fu-Manchu’s incomprehensibility militates against the seemingly autocratic nature of the thriller: some element of his nature always eludes the prescribed responses of Rohmer’s characters. Yet Fu-Manchu’s indeterminacy remains a carefully contrived narrative feature necessary to sustain both the inquisitive gaze of Dr. Petrie and the police pursuit that follows. As the fulcrum for narrative suspense, the opacity of Fu-Manchu becomes central to the mobilization of imperial power. At the same time, however, Rohmer’s invasion narrative highlights the extent to which this palpable inscrutability exists as the English characters’ and indeed his own dream-fantasy of the East’s essential otherness. In Rohmer’s Fu-Manchu stories, radical otherness of the East constitutes a willful fabrication that mobilizes and attempts to legitimate the vigilant surveillance of Petrie and Smith (and, by extension, the novel’s readers). Exposing the repeated contrivance of these British constructions of Fu-Manchu’s opacity, Rohmer’s narrative intimates that obscurity must be continually reproduced in order to sustain both the classificatory gaze and the imperial force that follows in its wake.

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Notes

¹ Corinn Columpar's "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone" presents an overview of how theoretical accounts of the colonial and anthropological gazes constitute mechanisms for fixing the essential alterity of the non-white subject. In *The Third Eye*, Fatimah Tobing Rony discusses the "native villages" at the Paris Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895. Maria Torgovnick analyzes the "ethnographic" approach to the museum in 19th century Britain in *Gone Primitive*.

² Michael Matin also dismisses the early thriller as a "Tory-Conservative" genre (252). Editor's note: Cf. the variety of interpretations regarding xenophobia and Stoker's turn-of-the-century *Dracula*.

³ See Lukács's "The Ideology of Modernism" and Jameson's chapter "Romance and Reification: Plot Construction and Ideological Closure in Joseph Conrad" in *The Political Unconscious*.

⁴ Corinn Columpar distinguishes the "disciplinary component" of the colonialist gaze from the more neutral, scientific identification of otherness at work in the "anthropological gaze" (39). In *Imperial Leather*, Anne MacClintock identifies a repressive, controlling aspect to what she terms the imperial gaze.

⁵ By making this assertion, Benjamin suggests that fascism appropriates the new mechanically reproducible medium of film in order to re-activate the sense of aura that he claims is in the process of dying out. The fascist mass spectacle manufactures the sense of authority characteristic of the auratic artwork, but instead of accentuating the distance between the spectator and the image, it crafts this aura as the expression of the masses. An emanation of the masses' collective desire, the fascist spectacle activates the authority indicative of the auratic artwork as a means of binding the masses more *closely* to the power of the nation state. Benjamin perceives the fascists' reactivation of the aura and authority of the image as a fundamentally false one that merely serves to distract the masses without actually changing the capitalist system of property relations.

⁶ When contrasted to the heterosexist structure of the gaze that characterizes Petrie's active, desiring gaze at the spectacle of Karamaneh, the

homoerotic tinge of Petrie's desire to see Fu-Manchu may be neutralized and re-coded as a homosocial political relationship. This reading owes much to Eve Sedgwick's discussion of the operation of homosocial desire in *Between Men*.

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